



# ***South Atlantic Fishery Management Council***

## ***News Release***

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### **Council Requests Interim Rule to Close Red Snapper Fishery** ***Closure intended to help meet requirements to end overfishing***

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council voted to request an interim rule for red snapper that would close the fishery in federal waters for both commercial and recreational fishermen for 180 days with a possible extension of 186 days. The request for the closure, directed to NOAA Fisheries Service, is designed to help address overfishing for red snapper until more long-term management measures are implemented. A 2008 stock assessment for red snapper in the South Atlantic region shows the stock continues to be overfished and is undergoing overfishing at nine times the sustainable level. If approved, it is anticipated the closure would be implemented in late June or early July, 2009.

The controversial decision to request the interim rule was made in a split vote, 7 to 6 after the Council heard public testimony during its meeting last week in Jekyll Island, Georgia. Fishermen questioned the recent stock assessment and the need for a closure of the fishery, many saying they have observed increases in the number of red snapper, especially along the Georgia and northeast Florida coasts. The stock assessment, conducted through the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) process, attributes these increases to strong year classes of red snapper in 1998 and 1999 that have now reached legal size. However, the updated assessment shows the stock continues to be overfished and has been experiencing overfishing since the 1970's.

"There is not a tougher decision than closing a fishery," said Council Chairman Duane Harris. "We've delayed this vote until now, but the law requires that we have measures in place to address overfishing by this July." The Council received notice on July 8, 2008 from NOAA Fisheries Service that overfishing was occurring for red snapper. The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires the Council to develop regulations to end overfishing within one year of notification. As a result, the Council began preparing Amendment 17 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan that includes measures to end overfishing and establish a rebuilding plan for red snapper. However, the amendment is currently under development and is not expected to be implemented by the July deadline.

Red snapper are found from North Carolina to the Florida Keys and the Gulf of Mexico. The bulk of landings of red snapper in the South Atlantic come from the recreational fishery. In 1983, a 12" size limit was established for red snapper. Because of concerns for red snapper overfishing, the size limit was increased to 20" in 1991 and a recreational bag limit of 2 fish was implemented. These regulations led to many more fish being released by the recreational sector.

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The most recent assessment indicates the large number of discards combined with high release mortality rates (released fish that die) is one of the major factors contributing to overfishing of red snapper in the South Atlantic. Release mortality rates are estimated to be 40% for the recreational sector and 90% for the commercial fishery. For example, using landings data from the recreational fishery for 2004 through 2006, an estimated 41,772 red snapper were harvested. However, the estimated number of fish that died when discarded during this period was 73,147, increasing the total mortality to 114,919 red snapper.

For both the commercial and recreational fishery, a reduction of 88% of the total removals (landings and dead discards) is necessary to end overfishing. The additional regulations proposed in Amendment 17, including area closures, will end overfishing. The amendment also includes options for a red snapper monitoring program involving the head boat industry to collect data to be used in future stock assessments. Public hearings for Amendment 17 will be scheduled later this year and it is anticipated the Council will approve Amendment 17 for review by the Secretary of Commerce in late 2009.

“The vote on the interim rule tells what a tough decision this is for the Council,” said Chairman Harris. “But because of the law, it’s a decision we had to make.”

The next meeting of the Council is scheduled for June 8-12, 2009 in Stuart, Florida. For additional information regarding Council meetings, including briefing book materials and summary motions, visit [www.safmc.net](http://www.safmc.net) or contact the Council office.

<p><b>The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.</b></p>
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